

Proper 12A [2]
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Romans 8.26-39
St. Augustine's, Whidbey Island
July 24 2011

Blessed be the Name of God

For some several weeks now, we have been traveling alongside Paul's Letter to the Romans, allowing it to stand on its own while our preaching attention was given to some of the parables of Jesus as Matthew has remembered them. But it's time now to learn from Paul, to learn from Paul about prayer and the constancy of God.

Martin Luther called Paul's Letter to the Romans, "the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel." [*Preface*, para. 1] What we have heard read to us this morning is perhaps the most powerful of all the things Paul has to tell us in this letter of his. It is a virtual catechism of the faith and overwhelmingly good news.

In our reading this morning, Paul begins, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." "...we do not know how to pray as we ought..."

Consider this and think about your life of prayer. Beyond the gathered prayers of the Church, many of us struggle to find a time or a way or the will "to pray as we ought." As is true for me and, I suspect, true for many of you, the gathered prayers we offer here this morning give us a vocabulary, a set of words upon which to rely in our private praying, but that private praying still does not come easily for lots of folks.

To tell you the truth, in the era when I was first ordained, an era I share with Bill Burnett and Fletcher Davis, we ordained folks were expected to pray the daily office,

morning prayer and evening prayer, every day. My “weakness” as Paul puts it was sufficient that I was unable to sustain this discipline, a source of some guilt that I managed to overcome over time.

Happily, some years ago, having struggled with the discipline of regular, even daily prayer, Amy and I found a very graceful way forward. Every evening, before our evening meal, we offer intercessory prayer. Dependent on the deep sighing of the Spirit to stimulate not only our desire to pray but also our imaginations, we offer to God whatever has come to us that day. We offer our concerns for the world, especially those who suffer the torment of war, those known to us who are sick, and, of course, we offer thanks for the joys of the day. As I was writing these words earlier in the week, I received word of the death of two priest friends, men I have known for a long time. They and those who love them were lifted that evening in the prayers of our house. We have confidence in our prayers as Paul so rightly reminds us, because the Spirit of God is the agent of our yearnings.

Every Wednesday morning, a faithful group of parish members gathers right here for eucharistic and intercessory prayer. At 10 a.m. last Wednesday, 13 of us were here, asking God’s healing presence in our own lives and in the lives of people we named before God, people whose needs we knew. It is a time full of grace and spiritual power. There are several people for whom the Wednesday service is “church” for the week, since for various reasons they cannot get here to be with us on Sunday.

Although the overall energy of that mid-week service has to do with healing, it is as much about intercessory prayer as it is about healing for ourselves. Prayers are invited

for particular people, for our parish, for areas on the world torn by famine or war. There is a gracious intensity to what we do, confident in the presence and constancy of God.

These folks gather reliant on the deep sighs of the Spirit, expecting that God will indeed search their hearts. We do not gather in order to talk God into something. No, rather we gather to make ourselves available, vulnerable to grace, knowing as Paul tells us, “all things work together for good for those who love God.” There is nothing pragmatic about it at all. We each know, we all know that, no matter what we ask, we must always wait upon God.

The same would be said about the group of us who gather on Monday, late afternoon, to sing God’s praises. It is very like a small monastic community, singing evensong with discipline and simplicity. The folks who lead the songs are people who cannot help but sing God’s praise, a cappella singing accompanied and supported only by the deep sighing of the Spirit. What rises to the ears of God is made beautiful by the Spirit, however frail our own efforts.

Neither of these gatherings through the week needs more people present to make them authentic or worthwhile. Their integrity as dimensions of the liturgical ministry of this parish is clear and obvious. At the same time, should you find these gathering either attractive or in some surprising way necessary, you would be welcome, once upon a time, every so often or regularly. There is nourishment to be found in both gatherings.

There is, you see, much prayer that is stirred up in this room, and the residue of it sustains through the week.

By some means and at some time prior to now, you have bound yourselves to God in Jesus Christ. In so doing, you have undertaken a faithful responsibility to abide in “the

apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers." This is the language from the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as it is contained in the Baptismal Covenant in our Prayer Book. [Acts 2.42; BCP 304]

As necessary as we may find the practice of prayer, either the gathered prayers of the church, or private prayer or both, our prayerful activity is counted foolish by much of the world that surrounds us. That makes our praying, what we are doing right now, counter-cultural, not something some of us know much about! But it is true. We stand or kneel or sit in prayer and in so doing, stand over against the mechanics of social exchange that form our culture. This for that, expecting good value. Put the coin in the vending machine and out comes the soft drink. The mechanics of social exchange. I do something to cause something to happen. You know the pattern, the rhythm. This is not how we know that prayer "works." In the final analysis, all our praying gets distilled to that potent phrase in the prayer Our Lord taught us, "your will be done."

And in so doing, by bringing our heart and wills to God, we join ourselves to the good purposes of God, confident in God's intent to accomplish good in all the world. We make ourselves vulnerable to the agency of God's Spirit, that what we need and yearn for and pray for may come to pass.

Such praying also obligates us to align ourselves with our prayer and do whatever work those prayers require of us. If we pray for the sick in the parish and do not visit them, do not call or write them, then we are subverting the good intentions of our praying. Last week I reminded you of the good counsel of St. Augustine of Hippo, "Pray as if everything depended on God; and work as if everything depended on you." So it is.

In Paul's letter this morning, he teaches us even further. He asks his Roman readers, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" It's a wonderful rhetorical question, one intended to allow Paul to say what he knows so well to be true. In what he says in answer to his own question, we hear what must fuel your life and mine every day, every moment. Hear this, "...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In my life, and for a very long time now, Paul's confidence has made it possible for me to get out of bed every morning, to face or enjoy whatever today brings. I have appropriated into myself Paul's confidence in the constancy of God, and I want so much for you to do the same.

If I were foolish enough to ask you what you think preaching is for, heaven only knows what answers I would get, so I'm not going to ask you. But I will tell you what I think it is for, why I and so many others invest themselves in this task. Preaching is for edification, edification. This is not education. This is edification. This means that, just this very minute and right here, it is my responsibility, with God's help, to build you up, to edify you, to make your faith stronger, more durable, to strengthen you in your life in Christ. This being the case, I know of nothing I can offer you more edifying than Paul's testimony here. Nothing "can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Last week, we read portions of Psalm 139, the place on which Paul stands this morning. The Psalmist wrote, "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you

know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar...Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast.” [Ps. 1139.1,6-9]

My friends, this is life with God, the life we have chosen in Jesus. Even though God knows us as intimately as the Psalmist says, even though God knows us that well, God is still content to abide with us, inseparably, to our good and to the end. We have joined ourselves to God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Dear Ones, pray as you are moved to pray and enjoy the love of God, constant and without measure.

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